

On and By the Water

Without proper implementation of the SSF Guidelines, plans for the Blue Economy and Blue Growth will come to naught for small-scale fisheries

The European Union presents the Blue Economy and Blue Growth as follows: “Europe can unlock the untapped potential for growth in its blue economy while safeguarding biodiversity and protecting the environment. Traditional sectors such as maritime transport and maritime and coastal tourism will gain in competitiveness. Growing emerging sectors, such as ocean renewable energy and blue biotechnology, can become a key to creating more jobs, clean energy, and more products and services.”

There is no mention of small-scale fisheries here, not even fisheries. Small-scale fisheries are, after all, the most ‘traditional’ of all sectors in the Blue Economy. Why this omission? Is it because small-scale fisheries have no growth potential? Is it just forgetfulness, or another example of their marginalization?

it is fitted to local contexts. If small-scale fishing people are excluded, they are at risk of losing their livelihood. If they are not at the table, they are on the menu.

Marine Spatial Planning

In the Blue Economy, the number and diversity of stakeholders in coastal areas are likely to increase. With space becoming scarce, conditions will be ripe for conflict, which will hamper growth. Which investor will risk an area that looks like a war zone? The remedy for this scenario is Marine Spatial Planning (MSP) involving all stakeholders.

Since MSP is conducive to Blue Growth, it would be of interest to know how small-scale fisheries are treated. The geographer Brice Trouillet examined the content of 43 current MSPs in different countries around the world in 2019. He found that capture fisheries do not show up, neither in the maps nor in the plans. For small-scale fisheries in the Blue Economy scenario, this does not bode well.

A map is not a neutral instrument. Once MSP starts mapping the sea and allocates space to various stakeholder groups accordingly, it is bound to have distributional consequences. This is especially problematic for fishers’ mobility, in contrast to aquaculture pens, windmill farms and oil rigs, which stay put. With mapping and spatial distribution, fishers run the risk of being both fenced in and out. If MSP means that they are no longer free to chase the fish where they can find it, they have reason to be skeptical.

Whose stakes?

What share of space is fair? It lies in the eyes of the beholder. There is often no agreement on whose stakes are more

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As a concept, the Blue Economy evolved from the Green Economy and the Rio+20 conference, originally launched by the association of small-island developing States. It is now all over the world. One can get the impression that it is not about a problem searching for a solution, but the opposite—a solution seeking a problem! As if the problem is known entirely and its solution is the same everywhere, regardless of geography. However, whether growth in the Blue Economy will be a win-win, depends on what is included in the concept, on how

This article by Svein Jentoft (svein.jentoft@uit.no), Professor Emeritus, Norwegian College of Fishery Science, UiT-The Arctic University of Norway, Tromsø, Norway, builds on his keynote address at the 1st International Conference on Sustainable Fisheries, held at Sylhet, Bangladesh, 25-27, August 2019



Fishermen preparing for a fishing trip in Karinkulam fishing village, Thiruvananthapuram, Kerala, India. Small-scale fisheries are, after all, the most 'traditional' of all sectors in the Blue Economy

legitimate and urgent, which ones should carry more weight. This is not mathematics but a political issue. Those with most at stake are not necessarily those in power, as is the case with small-scale fishers. If measures are not taken to prevent it, small-scale fishers are easily pushed aside.

Ralph Tefon studied MSP in the Baltic. He had this to say about it in 2019: "MSP entails a move from the possibilities of chaos and 'resource rush' to social order, which facilitates predictability and guarantees normatively laudable individual and collective agency. However, the space for concerted action is never immunized from politics, as powerful actors may misuse opportunities for collective action to pursue individual rather than collective goals."

At the third Small-Scale Fisheries World Congress in Chiang Mai, organized by the Too Big To Ignore (TBTI) initiative in October 2018 (see www.toobigtoignore.net), Moenieba Isaacs introduced the concept of Blue Justice. To achieve justice in the Blue Economy, MSP would need to account for the weight of the various stakes, and the

rights that apply in particular situations. Yet this is not what typically happens. Marine policy analyst W Flannery and his colleagues point out: "Marine Spatial Planning offers the possibility of democratizing management of the seas. MSP is, however, increasingly

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implemented as a form of post-political planning, dominated by the logic of neoliberalism, and a belief in the capacity of managerial-technological apparatuses to address complex socio-political problems, with little attention paid to issues of power and inequality. There is growing concern that MSP is not facilitating a paradigm shift towards publicly engaged marine management, and that it may simply repackage power dynamics in the rhetoric of participation to legitimize the agendas of dominant actors."

Should MSP bring democracy and order while securing the legitimate, urgent, and rightful stakes of small-scale fishers, they should welcome it. If, on the other hand, MSP fails to deliver, small-scale fishing people should mobilize. To shield themselves from the so-called ‘ocean grabbing’ they must be empowered at their own initiative.

SSF Guidelines


In the Blue Economy, small-scale fishing people must have agency. They must have sufficient organizational, legal and cognitive power to secure their own interests. This is also stated in the Voluntary Guidelines for Securing Sustainable Small-Scale Fisheries in the Context of Food Security and Poverty Eradication (SSF Guidelines). TBTF published a major study about the implementation of the SSF Guidelines, which includes over 30 case studies from around the world. The study shows that some countries have taken on the Guidelines, while others are sitting on the fence.

Coming from an underdog position, a level-playing field may still not be sufficient to secure sustainable small-scale fisheries in the Blue Economy. Therefore, the SSF Guidelines talk about ‘preferential treatment’ of small-scale fisheries and the importance of protecting, respecting, and advancing their human rights. The Guidelines also have something to say about MSP in article 10.2: “States should, as appropriate, develop and use spatial planning approaches, including inland and marine spatial planning, which take due account of the small-scale fisheries interests and role in integrated coastal zone management. Through consultation, participation and publicizing, gender-sensitive policies and laws on regulated spatial planning should be developed as appropriate. Where appropriate, formal planning systems should consider methods of planning and territorial development used by small-scale fishing and other communities with customary tenure systems, and decision-making processes within those communities.”

By endorsing the SSF Guidelines, FAO member states committed themselves to protecting and advancing

the interests of small-scale fisheries in MSP. Securing existing tenure rights would then be essential.

Life above water

Small-scale fisheries also figure in the UN Sustainable Development Goals, in SDG 14: Life below Water. Given their history of marginalization, one should appreciate their mentioning in such a prominent context. Without sustainable management of below-water resources, Blue Growth will be a disaster for small-scale fishing people. Yet, what is happening in small-scale fisheries are not just taking place below but above water – on and by the water. Therefore, we cannot avoid asking whether the Blue Growth agenda will also work for small-scale fisheries. If States do nothing to implement the SSF Guidelines, the Blue Economy will come at a loss for small-scale fisheries. 

For more

<https://www.icsf.net/en/samudra/article/EN/78-4328-Differences-Mat.html>

Differences Matter

<https://www.icsf.net/en/samudra/article/EN/80-4374-Come-Together.html>

Come Together

<https://link.springer.com/article/10.1186/s40152-014-0016-3>

Walking the talk: implementing the international voluntary guidelines for securing sustainable small-scale fisheries

<https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/1523908X.2017.1304210>

Small-scale fisheries within maritime spatial planning: knowledge integration and power

<https://www.springer.com/in/book/9783319550732>

The Small-Scale Fisheries Guidelines: Global Implementation